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ABSTRACT

This booklet was developed to help Peace Corps trainers relate to older volunteers and facilitate the older volunteers' orientation into the organization. The manual is organized into four short sections. Each section raises some potential problems likely to be experienced by older volunteers and offers suggestions for overcoming the problems. Topics covered in the sections are the following: becoming a trainee (families, friends, logistics); the training program (confidence, inclusion and age bias, health); the physical environment (vision, hearing, temperature, physical mobility and exercise); the learning environment (pacing, relevancy of the material, fear of failure); and language learning. A list of Peace Corps overseas offices is also included in the guide. (KC)

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Peace Corps Training And Older Volunteers

Peace Corps
INFORMATION COLLECTION & EXCHANGE
TRAINING MANUAL NO. T-33

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PEACE CORPS TRAINING

and

OLDER VOLUNTEERS

Produced By:
PEACE CORPS
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Linda Spink
OTAPS 1985

BECOMING A TRAINEE

The process of leaving familiar surroundings and support groups is difficult for all trainees. All have various involvements and responsibilities which may transfer into the training program itself. This process may be simpler or more complicated depending on the issues related to age and experience.

Families

Older trainees may be leaving children, grandchildren and/or spouses to join the Peace Corps. Whatever the age and independence of their offspring, many parents want to assure that close family ties can be maintained during their Peace Corps Volunteer service. Parents may feel that for special events or emergencies the distances are far too great, which may create a sense of uneasiness among them.

Suggestion:

Peace Corps staff may assist the Volunteer in maintaining communications with his/her children and other family members by facilitating the use of the telephone, visits to or from the family and expediting the mail. As one ages the finiteness of time and closeness of family may become more important. Discussing the family with staff or other Volunteers frequently provides the feeling of closeness to the family for both younger and older Volunteers.

Shortly after arrival in country, staff should provide the trainees with information concerning cables,letters and flights home. Although they may never avail themselves of these procedures, the knowledge that families can be reached quickly in emergencies may reduce anxiety caused by the distance involved.

Friends

The network of friends and community organizations developed prior to joining the Peace Corps is significant. Volunteers may receive news of friends who are retiring, moving, ill or even dead. Since these friends and associates have been an important part of the Volunteer's life, events of this kind may have a major influence on them.

Suggestion:

Support should be provided throughout their service to help the Volunteers adjust to changes or the loss of friends. The COS conference provides a good arena to discuss the changes Volunteers may experience when they return to the U.S.

Logistics

Sometimes older Volunteers have more concerns than younger Volunteers, such as house disposal, furniture, car, investments, pension payments, social security, etc. Even sound personal and financial planning cannot cover all of the problems which may arise during a two-year period.

Suggestion:

Facilitating the flow of communication and information on personal items is important for the staff to remember. Availability of appropriate forms and facilitating contacts with embassy personnel for guidance on income, property, business taxes, power of attorney, property transfers, bonds and other investments can reduce potential tension and anxiety.

THE TRAINING PROGRAM

All trainees experience adjustment problems when they arrive in their country of assignment. The need to adjust is heightened for older trainees who anticipate acceptance in an environment that is largely structured by Peace Corps for younger trainees.

Confidence

All Volunteers need assurance and reassurance that they are performing competently and that their presence makes a difference. Although many older Volunteers may have that self-confidence from their previous successful experiences, sometimes they measure their successes in country by the successes of younger Volunteers, which are inappropriate comparisons.

Confidence (con't)

Suggestion:

Older trainees and Volunteers should measure success by their own standards and abilities. Training staff should provide assistance in identifying realistic goals which will increase the self confidence of the older Volunteer.

Inclusion and Age Bias

Acceptance by and within the group is important for everyone. Trainees seek acceptance by the host country, Peace Corps staff, and other Volunteers. They are sensitive to cues that signal this acceptance. Many older trainees resist inclusion in an age group whose problems they do not share and that does not distinguish them as individuals.

Some older Volunteers are critical of staff who say "for your age" or "older Americans always have a harder time learning the language" or "older Americans cannot deal with anything different". These comments, often made unthinkingly or in an effort to be supportive, are insensitive and reinforce negative assumptions that may become reality. Staff should strive to eliminate these negative remarks.

Many older trainees are well aware of the role their age plays and the tendency on the part of some younger trainees to place them in a parental role and of the staff to place them in a slow-learners role with few opportunities to otherwise demonstrate their talents and abilities.

Suggestion:

Older trainees and Volunteers should be administered as individuals and not as a group and should be aware through efforts of staff that their concerns are valid to the overall success of the Volunteer experience.

Written and spoken materials which include older Americans in the basic concepts are more conducive to their inclusion in the group during training. References should be expanded to include spouses, children and grandchildren. References to areas of particular interest to older Volunteers could include health insurance, use of leisure time, social security, etc. References to friends

Suggestion (con't)

could be expanded to include a stronger family orientation. Other references should include 20 or 30 years of experience which may also have a very positive influence on host country nationals and other Volunteers.

Health

All trainees and Volunteers are concerned about their health. Concerns may be greater for older Volunteers. Recuperation from illness or accidents may be slower and susceptibility to complications may be greater. Older Volunteers will probably follow health recommendations more closely to minimize the risks of illness. Health problems are frequently given as a reason for early termination by older Volunteers.

Suggestion:

A thorough health orientation should be given as soon as the trainees arrive in country and follow-up information should also be provided at regular intervals.

Medical units should familiarize themselves with the particular needs of older Volunteers and incorporate this information into the health orientation. Topics should also be included which may be of greater interest to older Volunteers, i.e.dental care, eye care, including glaucoma and cataracts, reactions to heat including dehydration and rest periods, exercise, blood pressure, menopause, etc.

Some older Volunteers may wish to be assigned in areas where health facilities are close in order that attention may be available more quickly in case of serious illness or emergency.

Special coverage should be given to maintenance of personal health in cases where the job assignment is distant from a medical facility or health services.

THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Modifications in the physical setting may facilitate learning for older Volunteers. Peace Corps training sites are usually less than optimal for any learner. Practical modifications which can be accomplished easily and discreetly should be effected.

Vision

As a person becomes older, it becomes more and more difficult to see in dim light and there is greater sensitivity to glare. Night vision diminishes and adjustment to changing light intensitities is less rapid.

Suggestion:

Levels of illumination should, where possible, double that required for younger trainees and be more diffused.

A flickering, single light bulb is the worst type of lighting for anyone. Steady, multi-source, intensive lighting is the most desirable.

For easy reading, demonstrations against a neutral background are best. Contrasts in color, large charts and legible writing on charts and blackboard should be provided whenever possible. For typewritten material, double space on a pica typewriter is best.

Hearing

Hearing changes begin in the early thirties (particularly for men). There is usually a slight loss in high and low threshhold sensitivity and pitch discrimination and slower response to auditory stimuli. Particularly under stressful conditions rapid speech is more difficult to follow. Older Volunteers may wish to be certain of correct judgement before responding and they may choose not to respond rather than risk a hasty, uncertain response. The older listener normally experiences no problems when speech is clear, undistorted and without competitive noises or stimuli. When words are overlapped or interrupted, the ability to hear and respond greatly diminishes.

Hearing (con't)

Suggestion:

Allow for flexible seating arrangements which permit individuals to move closer to the speaker and the materials. Trainers should discipline themselves to speak clearly and distinctly, directly to the group, without increasing the volume. Good enunciation and repetition of unfamiliar names and words improves communication. To summarize, repeating questions and key points should become familiar tools to all Peace Corps instructors to improve understanding by the Trainees.

Temperature

There is a decrease in the ability of the body to respond to temperature extremes as the years increase and the body has more difficulty maintaining its normal temperature.

Suggestion:

Plan to avoid training locations or situations where there are rapidly changing indoor and outdoor temperatures.

Physical Mobility and Exercise

With aging there is a general slowing down of the body. Older persons may tire more easily or need more time to accomplish physical tasks. Although they may not require more sleep, they may require more rest, especially if the sleeping pattern is intermittent. The older person usually has less tolerance for stress, overeating, skipping meals, dehydration and salt depletion.

Suggestion:

To reduce fatigue, training sites or classrooms should be easily accessible. Additional energy used for physically negotiating a training site detracts from the energy available for learning. Training staff should provide regular and complete meals, adequate liquid and regular rest times even while traveling to a different location. Areas for rest and privacy should be included in the choice of location.

Suggestion (con't)

Physical activity should be varied to include all ages. Individuals or small groups should be encouraged to develop their own physical activities with minimal equipment. Exercise is important for everyone and should include older trainees.

Considerable thought should be given to the selection of live-in sites for older trainees. Access to roads, availability of regular and adequate meals, attention to noise levels and privacy should all be considered. Older Volunteers adjust well to diverse living situations, albeit a bit more slowly. The choice of the live-in location should be made with care at the beginning or the end of the training program.

THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The accumulated experiences of the older Volunteer may affect the environment in which s/he learns best. Improving the learning environment is equally applicable to younger Volunteers; the difference may be in the degree to which change is required to enhance learning. The capacity to learn does not decrease with age, but the teaching style and pace may need to be adjusted. The training staff must tailor the learning environment, where possible, to different age groups.

Pacing

For some, the most important factor contributing to the capacity to learn is the pace. A rapid pace reduces the time for internal organization which is necessary for long term memory. In tests that are not timed, research indicates that older learners are as capable as younger learners to receive, understand, and memorize material.

Suggestion:

Make an effort to slow the pace at which the material is presented. Reducing the time of individual and required sessions by providing an increased number of optional sessions may prove effective. Shorter but more frequent breaks, more time for lunch and more individualized instruction should enable everyone to find her/his most effec-

Suggestion (con't)

tive pace. Private time is also important to absorb the material which has been presented and should be an option during the day for some older trainees.

Relevancy of the Material

Learning must be logical for older trainees, since their ability or willingness to absorb seemingly irrelevant material decreases. The accumulation of experiences have taught the older person that relevancy is a criterion if the material must be learned. As adults, people are less inclined to accept everything which is presented as essential and more inclined to test and determine the usefulness of the materials at some later point. If the goals of the training program are not clear and defined in the beginning, specific material may be lost to the trainee by this sorting process.

Suggestion:

When goals are separated into short-term objectives the trainee's capacty to learn usually increases. The short-term objectives may be stated in terms of the anticipated working and living situation or in terms of the training material which follows. Whatever the strategy, trainees must understand that learning specific information benefits them. Material should be presented in logical sequence, from the known to the unknown. Success may be measured in different units of time; an hour, half day, full day, etc. when short, carefully related units of work are presented. Presentation of a central idea, followed by specific examples demonstrating the relationship between the two, will facilitate comprehension. Emphasizing the central theme with visual aids will assist in long-term retention as well as create a focus for organizing materials.

Fear of Failure

Generally, enthusiasm for taking risks diminishes as one grows older; in new learning situations, avoiding failure becomes more important. An older person joining the Peace Corps clearly demonstrates her/his capacity to take risks and seek new experiences. Underlying their motivation, however, may also be the fear of failure.

Fear of Failure (con't)

Suggestion:

Training should be designed to reward positive actions, and create an atmosphere of exploration and experimentation. Since individuals generally make some mistakes during a training program, negative feedback should be carefully screened though not eliminated entirely. Trainees should know that taking risks does not imply failure and trainers should provide continuous encouragement and rewards for experiementation in an effort to eliminate the fear factor. Trainers should convey a supportive, warm and understanding attitude toward trainees.

Older trainees come to Peace Corps with extensive experience and are generally better prepared technically for their job assignment. Their self-confidence and competence can be reinforced by providing opportunities for them to discuss and demonstrate their expertise. Additionally experience sharing may be helpful to other trainees and create a more positive approach to risk-taking in other aspects of training.

LANGUAGE LEARNING

The learning environment created for a good training program is particularly relevant to language learning. Pleasant physical surroundings and an enthusiastic atmosphere are important features. The capacity to learn is not diminished with the older Volunteer, but appropriate methodologies, effectively delivered, are critical for success.

In a worldwide survey of Peace Corps staff, the most common concern about older Volunteers was that of language learning. Many believed that older Volunteers learned languages more slowly than younger Volunteers. For all individuals who have not had previous foreign language learning experience, their progress may be slower. Another survey indicated that difficulty in achieving proficiency in a foreign language was the most frequent reason for early termination by older trainees. Learning a foreign language is an example of a situation which requires a willingness to take risks and make mistakes. The anxiety over learning and setting higher standards for themselves may be somewhat overwhelming and impede progress in situations where the

older Volunteers would normally perform very well.

The difficulty in learning the language frequently comes from the methods or the skill of the trainer. Some of the methodologies are fast, repetitive, rote systems of word building with insufficient explanation . Language trainers should broaden the base of their repetoire of skills and techniques to adapt more readily to different ages and levels. Older individuals frequently prefer training with familiar systems so that new methodologies should be introduced by associating them with the systems with which they are more familiar. Proceeding from the known to the unknown is an effective approach to gaining the confidence of certain groups.

During adulthood most learning takes place on an informal basis through daily contacts, rather than through drills and memorization in a competitive, compressed, time-oriented atmosphere. The small group, fast-paced, repetitive, stressful type of drilling instruction impedes learning for some trainees. Trainees have a wide variety of ability to learn language which can relate to a natural ability and/or their previous environment and experience with foreign languages. Older trainees should be encouraged to minimize competitive situations with other Volunteers since this could become an obstacle in achieving their natural potential which may, in fact, exceed that of a younger Volunteer.

All trainees, particularly those who are older, can benefit from discussions of non-verbal communication and other methods which are acceptable within the culture. Personality, enthusiasm, new friendships, etc., are avenues to overcoming initial communication problems and may serve to give the trainee the confidence to plunge quickly into daily use of the language.

Many older Volunteers who have difficulty learning a second language have been very successful otherwise as a result of personal strengths in technical skill, patience, tolerance and general interest. Trainers should emphasize to older Volunteers that good communication consists of many parts of which specific language skill is only one.

Fluency in the language is frequently more critical in one job assignment than another. For those who acquire the language more slowly, adjustments in the language training goals should be considered where appropriate and on an individual basis.

CONCLUSION

The number of older Americans joining the Peace Corps is rising; older Volunteers, host countries, and Peace Corps greatly benefit from this increased involvment. Hopefully, the information in this booklet will help Peace Corps staff continue to support and provide appropriate training for all Volunteers.

OPC 813-394

Since 1961 when the Peace Corps was created, more than 80,000 U.S. citizens have served as Volunteers in developing countries, living and working among the people of the Third World as colleagues and co-workers. Today 6000 PCVs are involved in programs designed to help strengthen local capacity to address such fundamental concerns as food production, water supply, energy development, nutrition and health education and reforestation.

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